

SWAMP RAT



Leathers (greasy). Shoulder-length hair (greasy). Tattoos. Halo of empty seats around him in the waiting room.

He came in. Right down to it he got. Just out of Paremoremo where he'd had a bit of trouble with another (non-gang) inmate and had collected a couple of extra years on his sentence for what was a very cleverly managed assault. Wanted Valium. Had been on it in prison. Well, as a self-confessed pseudo-liberal, this posed a dilemma. I cogitated, agreed, laid down three conditions he had to fulfil. If he deviated from these, finito.

About two years later when in bed at 11:30pm, the phone went. My address and phone number had always been available in the medical practitioners section of the phone book. Ringing was a security guard from Middlemore Hospital, 700km away. He had apprehended Michael walking through the grounds. I can imagine what he thought. I'd think the same meeting Michael at 11:30 in the hospital grounds.

The guard said that Mike said I would vouch for him. "Put me onto Mike," I said. He and I had a brief discussion. The famous 'F' word was used as a noun, a verb and an adjective.

So I told the guard that I would indeed vouch for Michael, and if

he had done or was doing something wrong, I'd have to take the rap with him. I heard no more.

A fortnight later Mike appeared in the consulting room. "Thanks doc," he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world that I should be woken up from a deep sleep to vouch for him under what could only be described as questionable circumstances.

He never caused me a day's further concern. He told me how to get magic mushrooms from Taranaki. I learned a lot about the ways of the nomads. I began to see how he saw the world.

I retired. For years he had been coming to the surgery and, at the end of four years, the halo of empty seats when he was there persisted. Some things don't change.

I quite liked Mike. That's the worst of being a pseudo-liberal – you like to see the good in most people. It's an undesirable and potentially dangerous attribute at times. It's still true, however, that no matter who comes to see you, you do your best for them, even if it is a questionable best by more current standards.

Somebody once told me I thought I was God. If so, it's not surprising that a mysterious way sometimes surfaces.

This is a column written from the swamp. The term is taken from the book by Donald Schon¹ where he talks about the crisis of confidence in professional knowledge thus:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solutions.

1. Schon DA. Educating the reflective practitioner. Jossey-Bass Publishers 1990.

Contributions

We invite amusing contributions to this column which should be relevant to the swamp and not more than 600 words.